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ABSTRACT

Although the Task Force on School Governance report claims that restructuring of school boards is essential to save the nation's failing schools, the real failure is society itself. Societal problems such as the nation's $4 trillion debt, air and water pollution, crime, drug abuse, and special interest lobbies abound, and legislators' unwillingness to face these problems has negatively affected American adults, children, families, and society. Demographic statistics pertaining to divorce, single and working mothers, teenage suicide, early parenthood, and poverty show a drastic change in family structure caused by worsening social conditions. However, a comparison of past and present standardized test scores, dropout and high school graduation rates, college completion, and other indicators shows improvements in student performance and educational attainment. Societal problems should be targeted, not school governance, which should remain the responsibility of locally elected school board members. In turn, boards should adopt policy, hire and fire the superintendent, and work with administrators to develop strategic plans for achieving educational goals. State legislators should eliminate most mandates affecting schools and direct all districts to develop a strategic plan. Local boards are best suited to meet the task force's goals of educational excellence, accountability, and interagency cooperation. (MLH)

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Response to the Task Force on School Governance

National Conference of State Legislatures

Cincinnati, Ohio

July 26, 1992

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The Task Force on School Governance in its report tries to convince readers that the restructuring of school boards is vital if reform, such as choice, site-based management, class size, teacher preparation, and student assessment is to occur. This is all based on the premise that "public schools are failing." Logic class in college taught us that, when the premise was wrong, the conclusion is considered wrong also! The premise that public schools are failing is ludicrous. Society is failing -- not the schools!

Let's discuss the problems and conditions affecting our society, families and students; the resulting demographics that stem from those problems and conditions; how these problems and conditions have affected our children's education; and how school board governance should be changed to meet the needs of our children and society.

There are a number of societal problems that affect our society and children. Among them are:

1. Our national economy is affected by a four trillion dollar debt which is increasing each year because of our legislators' unwillingness to balance the national budget.

   Further, the economy is affected by such factors as the failure of the savings and loans (estimated at 585 billion dollars), inside traders, illegal bond dealings, business fraud, international trade deficit, insurance company failures, business espionage, and 40,000 bankruptcies in 1990.

2. Pollution which taints our air and water is affecting us now and certainly will affect our children and their children unless we take steps to reduce and, in the long term, eliminate it.

3. Crime in our country, state, and community is on the rise and has to be reduced.

4. Drugs, a 50 billion dollar underground business, have to be stopped. They have drastically affected our children, society, and economic welfare.

5. Special interest groups affect our legislators, in many cases, for their own benefit rather than that of the society.

6. Take-over artists think of their own welfare rather than the people working in companies which are being bought and dismantled.

7. Companies move to other countries to reduce their production expenses because of America's higher labor costs and government regulations.

Most of the items listed have a negative effect on our economy and the working people of America. Anyone who believes these factors do not negatively affect the national economy and the welfare of the American people has not watched television, read the newspapers, and/or listened to the radio. These factors have certainly caused many displaced workers and increased the number of homeless and people on the poverty rolls of the states. These factors have significantly affected our adults and their children.

Other factors affecting our students are preoccupation with movies, television, and radio which sensationalize sex and brutality; drug pushers using children to act as runners and to sell drugs to other children; and a materialistic society that creates an atmosphere that causes many students to work long hours to get material possessions

at the expense of doing their school homework. Finally, imagine how much homework is completed or the quality of homework when 73% of students, 13 years of age, watch television three or more hours per day.

The unwillingness of leaders to face these problems and conditions and their failure to develop plans, both short term and long term, to bring about change have negatively affected our adults, children, families, and society. An adequate value system is not always in place when problem solving and decision making occur in government, business, and our adult world. No wonder the following demographics are part of the American society.

1) The divorce rate increased 143% from 1965 to 1988.

2) The poverty level of students in public schools increased from 16% in 1975 to 22% in 1988, is at 25% in 1992, and is projected to increase to 28% by 2020.

3) In 1956, there were 4% unmarried women with children; in 1986, there were 24% unmarried women with children.

4) In 1960, 11% of homes were single-parent homes; in 1988, 25% single-parent homes.

5) Children living with mothers only:

	White	*Black*		*Hispanic*
1960	6.1%	20%	1980	19.6%
1988	16%	51%	1988	27.2%

6) There were 40% of mothers in the work force in 1970 and 65% in 1988.

7) Twenty-nine percent of the mothers with children 0 - 5 years of age were in the work force in 1970 and 51% in 1988. Forty-three percent of the mothers with children 6 - 17 years of age were in the work force in 1979 and 64% in 1988.

8) Teenage suicide increased from 475 suicides in 1960 to 1,896 in 1986.

9) Married couples with children decreased from 89.3% in 1960 to 75.2% in 1988.

10) Percentage of students receiving AFDC payments increased from 4% in 1960 to 13% in 1990.

11) 1.1 million people are involved annually in divorce.

12) In 1989, one out of every six babies was born to "children."

13) Percentage of Americans in 1989 living below the poverty line (income of $12,674 a year for a family of four):

- White 11%
- Black 33%
- Hispanic 26%

These demographics show a drastic change in family structure caused by our societal problems and conditions. More women are working because of need or choice. In 60% of the married couples, both members are working. Most of the women are working to make ends meet; others are working because they want to have a career. Divorce is at an all-time high; there are many children being born to unwed mothers; thus, there are more single-parent homes. America's preoccupation with sex and brutality and its drug and alcohol consumption have produced teenage pregnancy, AIDS

in children, drug-exposed babies, sexually and/or physically abused children which, in turn, cause psychological and emotional problems for our children. The number of children coming from socioeconomically-deprived families is significantly increasing. All of these factors have had or are having a drastic impact on the children entering our schools.

Let's assume that researchers in 1960 or 1970 studied the problems and conditions, demographics, and student achievements for those years and the years preceding and had a crystal ball that told them the societal problems, conditions, and demographics through 1992 but no information on how students were doing in school. What would they project the students' achievements to be, taking into consideration the societal problems, conditions, and demographics of 1970 through 1992?

They more than likely would have projected that the student achievements would not be as good as those of the children of the 1960s or 1970s because of the societal problems and conditions affecting today's students.

Let's now take a look at how students have done in school over the years.

1) In 1971, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), reading proficiency for nine-year-olds was 207.3; in 1988, it was 211.8; for thirteen-year-olds, it was 255.2 in 1971 and 257.5 in 1988; for seventeen-year-olds, it was 285.4 in 1971 and 290.1 in 1988.

2) The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that in mathematics proficiency, the students nine years of age scored 219.1 in 1973 and 221.7 in 1986; the thirteen-year-olds scored 266 in 1973 and 269 in 1986; and the seventeen-year-olds scored 304.4 in 1973 and 302.0 in 1986.

3) The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that in 1970, in science proficiency, the students nine years of age scored 224.9 and in 1986, 224.3; the thirteen-year-olds scored 254.9 in 1970 and 251.4 in 1986; and the seventeen-year-olds scored 304.8 in 1970 and 288.5 in 1986.

4) The percent of 25-29-year-olds who did not finish four years of high school:

1940	61.9%
1950	47.2%
1960	39.3%
1970	24.6%
1980	16.9%
1990	14.1%

5) The percent of dropouts for the 17-18-year-olds was 50% in 1950 and 25% in 1988.

6) The percent of all students, 25 years of age and over, completing four or more years of college:

1950	7%
1960	8%
1970	12%
1980	18%
1990	22%

7) The percent of minority students, 25 years of age and over, completing four or more years of college:

1950	2%
1960	4%
1970	6%
1980	11%
1990	17%

8) The percent of minority students, 25 years of age and over, completing four years of high school:

1950	14%
1960	22%
1970	36%
1980	55%
1990	67%

9) Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores:

	Verbal	*Math*
1976	431	472
1982	425	458
1989	427	476

10) Substance use among seniors went down in all categories.

	Tobacco Use	*Alcohol Use*	*Drug Use*
1975	36.7%	68.2%	30.7%
1985	30.1%	65.9%	29.7%
1989	28.6%	60.0%	19.7%

11) High school completion:

	1950	*1990*
White	50%	85%
Black	25%	75%

12) Attending college (graduating seniors):

1950	7%
1988	38%

13) 23% of U.S. students finish four or more years of college. No other country comes close to this achievement.

14) Worldwide, the United States maintains its leadership position in research across many disciplines. Percentages of worldwide research conducted in the United States include:

- 38.4% in biomedical research
- 22.2% in chemistry
- 30.3% in physics
- 42.6% in earth/space sciences
- 37.3% in engineering/technology
- 40.3% in mathematics
- 40% of the world's publications in clinical medicine

15) The U.S. has won 215 (34.85%) of the Nobel prizes awarded from 1901 through 1990. The three closest competitors combined have won 194 (31.45%): England, 84 (13.62%), Germany, 62 (10.05%), and France, 48 (7.78%).

The U.S. has won:

- 61 (45.8%) of the 144 awards given for physics,
- 35 (29.9%) of the 117 awards for chemistry,
- 73 (46.2%) of the 158 awards for physiology or medicine,
- 18 (58%) of the 31 awards for economics (category established in 1969), and
- 18 (23%) of the 77 awards for peace.
- Literature is the only category in which the U.S. has not won the most awards. The U.S., with 10 (11%) of the 90 awards given for literature, is second to France which has had 13 individual winners.

The statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports provide much data on what happened demographically and educationally over the years. Also, reports such as the Sandia National Laboratories Report, many research reports of Dr. Harold Hodgkinson and Dr. Iris Rotberg, and *Scientific American* Report on Indochinese Refugee Families' Children in American Public Schools verify that the public schools are, overall, providing students a good to excellent education in spite of the many problems and conditions that our students face day to day.

The researchers of 1960 or 1970 would probably be favorably impressed with how well the schools have educated today's children. They would probably congratulate, rather than criticize, American public education.

The premise that American public schools are failing, thus the governance of said schools should be changed or restructured, is too simplistic. What really has to be corrected and improved are the societal problems and conditions affecting our society, families, and children.

Neither the public school system nor its governing body is "broken." It is the leadership of our society that has been unwilling to face the national, state, and local problems and conditions that confront our citizens. It is time that we realize our students' problems are those caused by a weak, materialistic, and permissive adult society.

Governance of school districts should be left in the hands of locally elected school board members. State and federal laws and regulations that interfere with local control of school districts and restrict the creativity of local school boards and educators should be eliminated.

In turn, the school boards should:

- Develop policy
- Hire and fire the superintendent
- Work with administrators to develop strategic plans for:

1) Budget and finance
2) Buildings and grounds
3) Personnel and staff development
4) Curriculum and instruction
5) Pupil personnel services
6) Parental and community involvement

7) Services rendered to students: transportation, school lunch, latch-key, etc.
8) Safety and welfare of students and staff members.

School boards should also set procedures for oversight of the various functions of the school district, set goals for the school district, and work with other children's agencies to better serve today's children.

In order to return local control and accountability to the local school district, the state legislators should:

1) review all mandates that affect schools and eliminate as many as possible;
2) not pass any further mandates without money to support them; and
3) have each district develop a strategic plan (goals, objectives, activities, and method of self-evaluation).

The local boards of education are best suited to meet the goals set by the Task Force on School Governance which are:

1) world class educational system,
2) accountability for schools, and
3) establishing a structured relationship with other children's agencies.

Since school districts' board members, as well as educators, are part of the adult leadership, we state that we will provide the very best educational opportunities in order to improve our students' achievements, BUT the other leaders and citizens must do their part to correct the problems and conditions affecting our adult citizens and their children if we are **to reach a common goal: children achieving at high levels and reaching their full potential.**

In summary, 15 years from now, there will be an even greater number of retired and poverty-stricken citizens living in the United States. The baby boomers will have retired; thus, there will be fewer people in the work force to pay for the care of the elderly and deprived. These factors will lead to more deprivation and societal unrest.

Today's leaders must make a concerted effort to develop strategic plans for each societal problem discussed; the plans must be both short-term and long-term if they are to benefit future generations. Take a moment to consider the factors leading to the fall of the Roman Empire. The similarities of today's society and the Roman society are real and shocking. We cannot permit our society to suffer a tragic ending like that which happened in Rome. We must take the responsibility today to assure a brighter tomorrow for our society. It is time to stop criticizing each other and to find ways of identifying the real problems in our society and what we have to do as educators, legislators, and parents to "turn things around."